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## EARLY FREE-THINKING SOCIETIES IN AMERICA

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The rise and fall of early free-thinking societies in America offers a picture of considerable interest. The background is that of eighteenth-century deism—with the neutral tints of unbelief; the high lights are furnished by the fires of the French Revolution, the shadows by the dark fires of reaction. Across this canvas march many figures—rationalists like Franklin and Washington, ardent innovators like Jefferson, and a host of lesser characters—Frenchmen like Genêt and his Jacobins, Anglo-Americans like Paine and Houston, plain Americans like Elihu Palmer, with his *Principles of Nature*, English reformers like Robert Owen and his sons with their liberalizing communism; and ever opposing this army of radicals, the conservative elements—heads of colleges, leaders of the bar, and, as particular defenders of the faith, the clergy of New England.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The general histories of liberal thought fail to do justice to this subject. J. B. Bury, *A History of Freedom of Thought*, London, 1913, is an excellent short history, but offers only one pertinent reference, regarding political disabilities in Maryland. John Cairns, *Unbelief in the 18th Century*, Edinburgh, 1881, has nothing on the United States. A. S. Farrar, *A Critical History of Free Thought*, New York, 1879, is extreme in its statements. For example, p. 199 refers to Paine's *Age of Reason* as "that infidel work by which his name has gained an unenviable notoriety . . . he gave expression in coarse Saxon words to thoughts which were passing through many hearts." J. M. Robertson, *A Short History of Free Thought*, 3d edition, London, 1915, contains a valuable chapter on "Early Free Thought in the United States" from Franklin and Paine and Jefferson, to Palmer, Houston, and Priestley. Too much confidence perhaps is here put in Moncure Conway's *Life of Thomas Paine*, New York, 1893. Fuller accounts of the beliefs of Franklin and Priestley may be found in my *American Philosophy, The Early Schools*, New York, 1907, pp. 229–265 and 396–406.

From the conservative American side Robert Baird's *Religion in the United States of America*, Edinburgh, 1844, presents an overdrawn picture: "Infidelity," he says, "has descended to the lower ranks, the purlieu, where it finds its proper aliment, the ignorant and vicious" (op. cit. p. 650).

The first agitation against free-thinking societies was largely due to the implications of the word "infidelity," as carried down from our Revolution days:

"There stood the infidel of modern breed,  
Blest vegetation of infernal seed,  
Alike no Deist, and no Christian, he;  
But from all principle, all virtue free."<sup>2</sup>

So ran the doggerel description given by President Dwight of Yale College. He added that in New England the name "infidel" proverbially denotes an immoral character.<sup>3</sup> Now as his clerical colleague, Jedidiah Morse, explained, the duty of the clergy was to warn their parishioners that a spirit of license and of French infidelity was abroad which could be repressed only by a strenuous and combined effort.<sup>4</sup>

This advice had political implications. Thus a charge was made by the author of *The Hamiltoniad*, that every reasoner in the cause of the people was denounced by the royal Junto of New England as a Jacobin, an infidel, and a republican villain.<sup>5</sup> He added that in New England the Tories are reviving the hackneyed theme that religion is in danger because Mr. Jefferson in his political capacity lets it alone.<sup>6</sup> Now Jefferson, along with Tom Paine and Cooper, son-in-law of Joseph Priestley,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Dwight, *Triumph of Infidelity*, p. 31, New Haven, 1778, dedicated to Voltaire.

<sup>3</sup> *Travels in New York and New England*, 1,372, New Haven, 1821-23.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Adams, *History of the United States During the First Administration of Thomas Jefferson*, p. 78, New York, 1890.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Pasquin, *The Hamiltoniad, or An Extinguisher for the Royal Faction of New England*, p. 25, Boston, 1804.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42, note.

<sup>7</sup> Priestley, the English chemist, while in Northumberland, Pa., had published an addition to his *Observation on the Increase of Infidelity*, London, 1776. Despite its title this book was not illiberal. Written by the great Unitarian leader, it attacked "the corrupt system of Christianity" in Europe and added: "But happily, in this country, the Church has no alliance with the State, every person being allowed to worship God in whatever manner he pleases." *Observations*, Preface, pp. x, xi.

had been called one of the three doubting Thomases.<sup>8</sup> But "the philosophical chief of Monticello" who had called the clergy "hierophants of superstition" was not the only one of the Revolutionary leaders suspected of laxity.<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Franklin had been thought unsafe by George Whitefield in spite of his discreet reply to that evangelist,<sup>10</sup> while apprehensions existed even as regards the father of his country. Replying to the solicitous inquiry of the church of Kingston concerning his eternal welfare, Washington, in a little-known letter, answered in a way that gave slight satisfaction to his interrogators but was at least a model reply as to one's private beliefs:

*"Gentlemen:*

I am happy in receiving this public mark of the esteem of the Minister, Elders, and Deacons of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of Kingston.

Convinced that our religious liberties were as essential as our civil, my endeavors have never been wanting to encourage and promote the one while I have been contending for the other—also I am highly flattered by finding that my efforts have met the approbation of so respectable a body.

In return for your kind concern for my temporal and eternal happiness, permit me to assure you that my wishes are reciprocal—and that you may be enabled to hand down your religion,

<sup>8</sup> Seth Payson, *Proofs of the Real Existence and Dangerous Tendency of Illuminism*, p. 53; New Haven, 1802.

<sup>9</sup> Jefferson indeed had gone so far as to declare that "it does no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god." Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> Franklin's letter of 6 June, 1753, to Whitefield is very non-committal: "The faith you mention has certainly its use in the world. . . . The worship of God is a duty. . . . Your great master thought much less of these outward appearances." Works (ed. Jared Sparks), 7, 75–76, Philadelphia, 1840. The following letter, often quoted, is evidently not authentic. It is not given in Sparks, nor in the Bigelow, Ford, or Smyth editions. In 1764 Franklin is alleged to have written to Whitefield: "That Being, who gave me existence, and through almost three-score years has been continually showering his favours upon me; whose very chastisements have been blessings to me; can I doubt that he loves me? And if he loves me, can I doubt that he will go on to take care of me, not only here but hereafter? This to some may seem presumption; to me it appears the best-grounded hope; hope of the future built on experience and the past." Franklin, Works.

pure and undefiled, to a Posterity worthy of their ancestors, is the fervent prayer of,

Gentlemen,

Your most obed. servant,

GO. WASHINGTON.

KINGSTON

16th Novr. 1782." <sup>11</sup>

It has been observed by a sympathetic historian of free thought, that this habit of reticence or dissimulation among American public men was confirmed by the treatment meted out to Thomas Paine.<sup>12</sup> It might be added that a complete billingsgate of bigotry could be compiled from the epithets applied to the author of the *Age of Reason*—atheist, blasphemer, deist, infidel; such terms by the reaction of resentment led subsequently to what clearly became a canonization of this apostle of free thought in the colonies. From the founding of the Theophilanthropical Society to the time of Lincoln's early political career, from the Hall of Science in New York City to the log cabin on the Indiana frontier, Paine was tremendously admired and had an enormous number of followers.<sup>13</sup> And the heterodoxy of political leaders was accentuated by the excitement due to the "French craze." As one annalist expressed it, the establishment of American independence was not effected without the moral contamination always the result of protracted wars; licentiousness both in conduct and sentiment had followed the footsteps of liberty.<sup>14</sup> More particularly, French infidelity was connected with French Jacobinism, and the tree of liberty, as well as the liberty cap, were considered by many as the outward and visible signs of the demoralization wrought by the coming of Genêt and his followers.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> From a photographic copy of the letter restored to the above church by De Witt Roosa, 1887.

<sup>12</sup> J. M. Robertson, *A Short History of Free Thought*, 1,322.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Herndon and Weik, *Lincoln*, p. 439, Chicago, 1889.

<sup>14</sup> Ebenezer Baldwin, *Annals of Yale College*, p. 145, New Haven, 1838.

<sup>15</sup> Dwight, *Travels*, 1,32.

There was now raised "the warwhoop of the pulpit" against the French Revolution as a deliberate attack upon the Church and the creeds. This attack was exposed in a flood of scarehead discourses. The series may be begun with the Reverend Joseph Lathrop's *A Sermon on the Dangers of the Times from Infidelity and Immorality, and Especially from a Lately Discovered Conspiracy against Religion and Government*.<sup>16</sup> In these American States, narrates Lathrop, there has for many years and more especially since our late Revolution been a visible tendency to infidelity. The great accession of foreigners has had a most unfriendly effect on the religion of the country. Most of these are men of fortune, learning, and address, but of licentious principles and dissolute morals. France is filled with atheists. An awful conspiracy against religion has lately been detected by Mr. John Robinson of Edinburg. He shows that the principles of the Illuminati are such as these: there is no supreme independent being, no moral government of the universe, no future existence. Of these societies, Robinson says there are great numbers scattered over Europe, some in England, several in America. His statement is made as the societies stood in 1786. In what parts of America they are formed, he gives no intimation; we choose to believe not in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Springfield [Mass.], 1798.

<sup>17</sup> Lathrop, *Sermon on the Dangers, Etc.*, pp. 12-17. See also Lathrop's *Collected Sermons*, Boston, 1812. The following literary rarities may be found in the New York Public Library as selected from the Paul Leicester Ford donation: William Brown, *An Oration spoken at Hartford, July 4, 1799*. Joseph Lathrop, *A Sermon on the Dangers of the Times from Infidelity and Immorality, and Especially from a lately Discovered Conspiracy against Religion and Government*, Springfield [Mass.], Sept., 1798. Jedidiah Morse, *A Sermon delivered May 9, 1798, the Day recommended for Solemn Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer*, Boston, 1798. Same, *A Sermon preached at Charlestown, November 29, 1798, with Appendix on French intrigue in the United States*, Boston, 1798. Same, *A Sermon exhibiting the Present Dangers and Consequent Duties of the Citizens of the United States of America*, Charlestown, April 25, 1799, the Day of the National Fast, Charlestown, printed, 1799 [Hartford Reprint]. Elijah Parish, *An Oration delivered at Byfield, July 4, 1799*. John C. Smith, *An Oration pronounced at Sharon, July 4, 1798*. William L. Smith, *An Oration*, 4 July, 1796, Charleston, S.C. David Tappan, *A Discourse delivered in the Chapel of Harvard College, June 19, 1798, occasioned by the approaching departure of the Senior Class from the University*, Boston, 1798.

Lathrop's complacent belief was to be speedily shaken. In the same year, on the day set apart for "Solemn Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer," the Reverend Jedidiah Morse began his protracted assault upon the Jacobin societies, upon Volney's *Ruins*, and upon the French Grand Orient with its affiliated American branches. These sermons at that time furnished a veritable public sensation. People had grown tired of the old hell-fire doctrines and attacks like those of John Wesley upon deists as "heirs of damnation." But here was a subject of real excitement, and the religious leaders made the most of it. Robinson's rather dubious work was again used as the chief source of information. The abuse of our rulers and clergy, explains Morse, is due to a deep-laid and extensive plan, which has for many years been in operation in Europe. To this plan we may trace that torrent of irreligion which threatens to overwhelm the world. This plan is now unveiled in John Robinson's *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against all the Religions and Governments of Europe*. Here we are informed that a society which calls themselves the Illuminated has existed for more than twenty years past in Germany. Their principles are avowedly atheistical; they abjure Christianity, justify suicide, declare death an eternal sleep, advocate sensual pleasures, call patriotism and loyalty prejudices, declaim against property and in favor of liberty and equality, decry marriage and advocate a promiscuous intercourse among the sexes. This society has secretly extended its branches through a great part of Europe and even into America.<sup>18</sup> The aim of the society is to acquire the direction of education, of church manage-

<sup>18</sup> Jedidiah Morse, A Sermon delivered . . . May 1798 . . . the Day . . . for Solemn Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer, pp. 18-21, Boston, 1798. Cf. note, p. 21. Robinson says, "The order of Illuminati took its rise among the Free Masons, but is a vile and pestiferous scion grafted of the stock of simple Masonry." Morse adds, "Judging from the characters which compose the Masonic Fraternity in America, at the head of which stands the immortal Washington . . . this leaven has not found its way into our American lodges."

ment, of the professorial chair, and of the pulpit, to bring their opinions into fashion by every art and to spread them among young people by the help of young writers. They strive to get under their influence the reading and debating societies and reviewers, journalists or editors of newspapers and other periodical publications, the booksellers and postmasters. From their private papers, which have been discovered and are now published, it appears that as early as 1786 they had several societies in America. Doubtless the *Age of Reason* and other works of that unprincipled author, as they proceeded from the fountain-head of Illumination were sent to America expressly in aid of this demoralizing plan. Doubtless the affiliated Jacobin societies in this country were instituted to propagate here the principles of the illuminated mother club in France.<sup>19</sup>

This is a formidable arraignment, but it is as yet based on surmises. Even Robinson's postscript to the American edition of his *Proofs*<sup>20</sup> could offer no precise evidence as to the existence of local French societies except for a vague statement that America contained several lodges.<sup>21</sup> There was no proof positive of the existence of "Illuminated" Clubs in the country. The original Illuminati were started in 1776 in Germany, and as yet there was no direct intercourse between the two countries. But Robinson had assumed that the Bavarian Order of the Illuminati was the source of the French Societies of

<sup>19</sup> Jedidiah Morse, A Sermon delivered . . . May 1798, etc., pp. 22-24.

Cf. p. 30. "The Declaration and Constitution of the American Society of United Irishmen, published in Philadelphia (since the publication of the first edition of this discourse), is evidently planned after the model of the Illuminated Societies in Europe, and their Test that a social body be considered secret is proof that Illuminism is spreading its undermining and disorganizing influence in this country."

<sup>20</sup> Third edition, Philadelphia, 1798.

<sup>21</sup> John Robinson, *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and the Reading Societies*, Philadelphia, 1798. Cf. 4th edition, New York, 1798. In both of these editions Robinson appears ignorant of the fact that there was a lodge named in honor of Franklin at Auteuil, in 1778. Cf. N. Deschamps, *Les Sociétés Secrètes*, 2, 11, Paris, 1880.



Illuminées, so Morse naturally lumps together the Teutonic and Gallic organizations. The new infidelity threatening the land was manifestly not made in Germany. Nevertheless the Jacobin clubs, instituted by Genêt, were declared by Morse to be a formidable engine for the accomplishing of the designs of France to subjugate and govern this country. They started into existence by a kind of magic influence in all parts of the United States, from Georgia to New Hampshire, being linked together by correspondence, by constitutional ties, and by oaths after the manner of the Illuminati in Europe. These clubs have been the chief disseminators in this country of the demoralizing principles of the Illuminati and the circulators of those publications which are designed to bring into discredit and contempt the Christian religion. So the illuminated French Revolutionists sent over Volney "to sap the foundations of morality," and Thomas Paine to wound religion by the shafts of wit and ridicule. Paine's maxim was that "an army of principles will penetrate where an army of soldiers cannot." So a cargo of fifteen thousand copies of the *Age of Reason* was sent into the United States and disposed of by sale at a cheap rate or given away.<sup>22</sup>

For this frightful tale of pernicious propaganda Morse still gives no authority.<sup>23</sup> Further gratuitous assumptions that French philosophers were in the plot may be best presented in Morse's own words: "Professor Robinson and the Abbe [*sic*] Barruel have given satisfactory proofs of a regular conspiracy against the Christian religion, of which Voltaire was at the head. . . . One method adopted by these anti-Christian con-

<sup>22</sup> Jedidiah Morse, A Sermon preached at Charlestown, November 29, 1798, with an Appendix exhibiting proof of the early existence, progress, and deleterious effects of French intrigue and influence in the United States.

<sup>23</sup> The tale of the free distribution of the *Age of Reason* was given by the New York Evening Post, July 12, 1803. Cf. Moncure D. Conway, *Life of Thomas Paine*, 2,330 note, New York, 1893. Other writers have repeated this but without going back to Morse.

spirators is to publish books calculated to discredit Christianity and ascribe them to deceased authors of reputation; such is the *System of Nature*, an insidious and blasphemous work, published under the name of M. Mirabaud, secretary to the French Academy. . . . Attempts have been made to circulate those poisons in Britain. Let Americans be on their guard.”<sup>24</sup>

Voltaire was of course at this time a name to conjure with. As President Dwight of Yale succinctly put it, the followers of Voltaire were possessed of hatred to Christianity, contempt of the Bible, and hostility against their Maker.<sup>25</sup> But the succeeding anecdote concerning the traveller Volney, friend of Jefferson and author of the *Ruins of Empires*, makes one doubt the trustworthiness of these discourses. So Morse continues: “M. Volney, a French philosopher, when in Boston in 1797, I am credibly told, expressed himself highly gratified at the progress of the principles, political and religious, of the French Revolution. . . . ‘England,’ said he, ‘will be revolutionized, Italy and the German States and all the enlightened parts of Europe, and then [he added, with the highest exultation] Christianity will be put in the background. Already has it received its mortal blow.’ . . . The gentlemen who heard this conversation are of the first respectability. One of them added that he ‘had been accustomed to hear similar sentiments from almost every Frenchman he had conversed with since the summer of 1792.’ . . . If we love our holy religion and our country,” concludes Morse, “let us shun the philosophy of Europe.”<sup>26</sup>

Lacking direct evidence as to the great conspiracy, Morse fills up his discourse with these hearsay anec-

<sup>24</sup> Jedidiah Morse, A Sermon preached at Charlestown, November 29, 1798, p. 20, note.

<sup>25</sup> Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New York and New England*, 4,367. New Haven, 1821-22.

<sup>26</sup> Jedidiah Morse, A Sermon preached at Charlestown, p. 21, note.

dotes. But in his fast-day sermon of 1799 he returns to the attack with better ammunition. The story is a long one, but highly interesting as showing how free-thinking had to contend against a virtual alliance between Church and State. In attacking Jefferson's friend, Volney, the New England pulpit had been charged with meddling in politics. But, it was replied, the clergy had a perfect right to do their part in saving the State. This will explain the tone of remonstrance which marks the opening of Morse's last and most important discourse:

"It must appear strange to a man who has impartially marked the career of abominations which the French government has pursued for several years past, that they should still find advocates among some Americans. . . . It has long been suspected that secret societies, under the influence and direction of France, holding principles subversive of our religion and government, existed somewhere in this country. This suspicion was cautiously suggested from this desk on the day of the last national fast. . . . I have now in my possession complete and indubitable proof that such societies do exist, and have for many years existed in the United States. I have, my brethren, an official, authenticated list of the names, ages, places of nativity, professions, etc., of the officers and members of a Society of Illuminati, consisting of one hundred members instituted in Virginia by the Grand Orient of France. This society has a deputy, whose name is on the list, who resides at the Mother Society in France, to communicate from thence all needful information and instruction. The date of their institution is 1786. The seal and motto of this society correspond with their detestable principles and designs. The members are chiefly emigrants from France and St. Domingo with the addition of a few Americans and some from almost all the nations of Europe. . . . There is evidence of the existence of a society of like nature and probably of more ancient date at New York, out of which have sprung fourteen others. The pernicious fruits of their insidious efforts are our unhappy political divisions, the increasing abuse of our wise and faithful rulers, the virulent opposition to some of the laws of our country, the Pennsylvania insurrection, the industrious circulation of corrupting books, and the consequent wonderful spread of infidelity, impiety, and immorality. The destruction of the clergy in all countries is evidently a part of the French system. What have the clergy of the United States done to provoke hostility?

They have 'preached politics,' being opposed to the hostile designs and insidious arts of the French government and to those atheistical, demoralizing, and detestable principles which their emissaries are endeavoring to disseminate in our country. To prevent this, it behoves us to watch the movements and detect and expose the machinations of their numerous emissaries among us. . . . I have received the following documents through the most respectable channel.<sup>27</sup> . . . The best informed Free Masons among us who have seen the preceding documents, disclaim these societies. They have presumptuously assumed the forms of Masonry, but are not of the order of true and good Masons. They are impostors. . . . There are 1,700 of these Illuminati among us all bound together by oath. Nay, there is too much reason to fear that many thousands of Frenchmen who are scattered through the United States, particularly southward of New England, are combined and organized (with other foreigners and some disaffected and unprincipled Americans) in these societies. . . . The principles and objects of this society are in part deducible from their motto and their horrid seal."<sup>28</sup>

This is the last of Morse's sensational disclosures. Its reference to the free-thinking societies of New York is one thing, the alleged connection between Illuminism and Masonry another. Both these subjects we shall take up later, since the former was an Anglo-American

<sup>27</sup> Cf. A Sermon exhibiting, etc., p. 35, Copy of an Original Document (translation): "At the East of the Lodge of Portsmouth in Virginia, the 17th of the 5th month in the year of True Light 5798, the Respectable French Provincial Lodge, regularly appointed under the distinctive title of Wisdom, 2660 by the Grand Orient of France, to the very respectable French Lodge, the Union, No. 14 constituted by the Grand Orient of New York. . . . We congratulate you TT :. CC :. FF :. upon the new constitutions or Regulations which you have obtained from the Grand Orient of New York. . . . With these sentiments we have the favour to be P :. L :. N :. M :. Q :. V :. S :. C."

Your very affectionate FF :.

By order of the very respectable  
Provincial Lodge of Wisdom.

GREU,

Secretary."

Morse adds to this translation a facsimile of what he refers to as a "horrid seal." This seal consists of such familiar symbols as the skull and crossbones, the sun and moon, and Masonic compasses. It is fortified by this Latin motto, "Amplius homines oculis quam auribus credunt."

<sup>28</sup> Jedidiah Morse, A Sermon exhibiting the Present Dangers and Consequent Duties of the Citizens of the United States of America, delivered at Charlestown, April 25, 1799, the Day of the National Fast, pp. iii, 15-46. A second printing of this sermon was made at Hartford, 1799.

rather than a Gallic affair, while the latter is a complication due to the "Anti-Masonic storm" of the next generation. Meanwhile Morse's sermons furnished a nine days' wonder. His reprinting in facsimile of the "horrid seal" with its skull and crossbones whetted the curiosity of the undergraduates who about this time were busied in their secret societies.<sup>29</sup> So we find the authorities at Harvard and Yale addressing words of warning to their charges. For example, the Reverend David Tappan, Hollis Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, delivers a discourse "occasioned by the approaching departure of the Senior class from the University."<sup>30</sup> Basing his remarks on Dr. Morse's National Fast sermon,<sup>31</sup> he cautions his hearers against the pretences to refined morality, to the most generous zeal for universal liberty and happiness, which have been made both by the Illuminati and by French politicians. Let the horrid practical fruits of such pretensions in the old world engrave on your hearts a perpetual caution against these innovating theories.

But it was Timothy Dwight, the "Pope of Connecticut," who was the chief academic defender of the faith. To the candidates for the baccalaureate in Yale College he addressed two discourses on *The Nature and Danger*

<sup>29</sup> The History of Phi Beta Kappa is a curious case in point. Founded at Jefferson's Alma Mater, the College of William and Mary, in 1776, a chapter was established at Yale in 1780 and at Harvard in 1781, and at Dartmouth in 1787, upon the joint action of the two former colleges. But as early as 1779, it was petitioned that the Harvard branch be conducted "in a less mysterious manner." This refers in part to letters in cipher passing between the Alpha Chapter of Virginia and the different branches. In the latter Anti-Masonic agitation, Jefferson's name was brought in, and he was charged with having founded this society and having fostered in it pernicious principles. In 1831 Avery Allen published his treatise on Masonry, containing a Key to the Phi Beta Kappa which criticised the motto of the society as follows: "Philosophy has been the watchword of infidels in every age, and by its learned and enchanting sound many unwary youths have been led to reject the only sure guide to heaven." The same year the Harvard chapter voted that "no oath or form of secrecy shall be required of any member of the society." Cf. John M. McBride, "The Phi Beta Kappa Society," *Sewanee Review*, April, 1915.

<sup>30</sup> Boston, 1798.

<sup>31</sup> Jedidiah Morse, *A Sermon* preached at Charlestown, p. 21.

of *Infidel Philosophy*.<sup>32</sup> Since the author apologizes for these discourses as "perhaps longer than the reader would have wished," we may simply say that Dwight's statements are somewhat contradictory. Charging the French Committee of Public Instruction with the present propaganda of free thought, he concludes as follows:

"As mere infidelity, it teaches nothing but to contest all principles and to adopt none. As scepticism, it has an ocean of doubt and agitation, in which there are no soundings, and to which there is no shore. As animalism and atheism, it completes the ravage and ruin of man, which in its preceding forms it had so successfully begun. It now holds out the rank Circæan draught, and sends the deluded wretches who are allured to taste, to bristle and wallow with the swine, to play tricks with the monkey, to rage and rend with the tiger, and to putrefy into nothing with the herd of kindred brutes." <sup>33</sup>

Dwight's work is historically of slight worth. The only thing of value in it is a postscript by the English editor impugning the credit to be given to Robinson's so-called *Proofs*.<sup>34</sup> The Scottish professor with his hearsay evidences is compared, in the language of Prior, to "the honest rook, who told a snipe, who told a steer." Nevertheless, in spite of certain doubts cast upon the *Proofs* of Robinson and his borrowings from Barruel, both these authorities were accepted as true by the general reader. A popular edition of extracts from their works was speedily published by Seth Payson under the title *Proofs of the Real Existence and Dangerous Tendency of Illuminism*.<sup>35</sup> This convenient handbook contained not only extracts from the most interesting passages of the two foreign authors, but "collateral proofs" of the statements of Morse. A Masonic friend of Payson's, for example, tells him that the Portsmouth branch is swelled by the arrival of the French fleet from St. Domingo. This lodge is not

<sup>32</sup> September 9, 1797, 3d edition, Cambridge (England), 1804.

<sup>33</sup> *Infidel Philosophy*, p. 89.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>35</sup> P. 199, Charlestown [Mass.], 1802.

in fellowship with the ancient order of Masons, but one of its members is a German.<sup>36</sup>

This is the most direct corroboration we have concerning Morse's statements regarding the Southern branch of Illuminism. It also furnishes a possible point of connection between America and Germany as the original home of the movement. But that connection is somewhat dubious. Robinson depends upon Barruel, but the latter's *Memoirs* were declared by a writer of the next generation as completely discredited, being written under the influence of an ardent imagination.<sup>37</sup> These strictures of a compatriot are manifestly too severe. A more moderate opinion is given by an English reviewer to the effect that however extravagant may be the opinions of some leading men among the Illuminées, the average will of the party, the collective pursuit of the confederated lodges, appears rather to have had Socinianism and Republicanism than Atheism and Anarchy for its object.<sup>38</sup>

Slight attention was apparently paid to such a defence, for it availed little against the Abbé's dramatic presentation of the vast conspiracy. Act I presents the means of the conspirators: philosophizing mankind through the Encyclopædia, etc.—the extinction of Jesuits; the extinction of all the religious orders; Voltaire's colony at Clèves under Frederick the Great; academic honors; and inundations of anti-Christian writings. Act II connects the Gauls with the Germans; a deputation arrives from Weishaupt to the Free Masons of Paris; then comes the success of the Deputies, and finally the coalition of the conspiring sophisters, Masons and

<sup>36</sup> Proofs, p. 104.

<sup>37</sup> J. J. Monnier, *De l'influence attribuée aux Philosophes aux Francs-Maçons et aux illuminées sur la révolution de France*, p. ii, Paris, 1822.

<sup>38</sup> This opinion was presented in the first American edition of Barruel's *Memoirs*, Elizabeth-Town, 1799, entitled, *The Abbé Barruel—Memoirs illustrating the History of French Jacobinism* (Preface of translator, who objects to the London Monthly Review of June, 1798, p. 240).

*Illuminées*, generating the Jacobins.<sup>39</sup> In the Third Act, the Grand Orient of Paris is presented as a reunion of all the lodges of the Kingdom, a sort of Masonic parliament with committees of the Administration of Paris, of the Provinces and of the Degrees. This grand empire over French Masonry issued its instructions to the lodges in Savoy and Switzerland, to those of Portsmouth in Virginia, of Fort Royal in Grenada, and, in short, to lodges in all the French colonies.<sup>40</sup>

This is evidently the original statement regarding the first American Illuminated Lodge, a statement which Robinson repeated without verification, but Morse had the luck to verify in his famous facsimiles "with their emblems of carnage and death." There is, however, another curious reference to this country which shows a use of the imagination, if nothing else. In 1797, says Barruel, a secret association was formed called *Amis des Noirs*. This appellation was adopted only the better to conceal the grand object of their conspiracy under the specious pretext of humanity. While occupying all Europe with the question they had proposed on the slavery of negroes in America, they never lost sight of that revolution which they had so long meditated.<sup>41</sup>

One ludicrous effect of the attack on the Illuminati was that the accusers themselves were given that bad name. In an anonymous charge against the Federalists as the Royal faction, New England was called the home of religious bigotry and persecution. Begotten at the College of New Jersey, this odious society was reared in Connecticut and confirmed, on its maturity, at Dartmouth and Yale. Educated in these colleges, its progeny has gone forth to spread tyranny and oppression over all the States. They have seized on the institutions and methods of education, pillaged the Episcopal churches,

<sup>39</sup> Barruel, *Memoirs*, IV, p. 200.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Part II, pp. 212-213.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Part II, p. 251.



secured land grants and money from State legislatures, waged war against other sects, sent missionaries to break up the peace between the settlers in Vermont and New York, anathematized the Church of Rome. Intolerance is ingrained in New Englanders. Remember the Blue Laws, many of which are yet in force.<sup>42</sup>

This of course is pure fiction. The whole affair, however, furnished grist for the political mill. In a Fourth of July oration in 1798, President Dwight again attacked the order of the Illuminati as atheists and villains. Two years later charges of infidelity were brought against Jefferson in an anonymous pamphlet entitled *The Voice of Warning to Christians on the Ensuing Election of a President of the United States*. In spite of this and similar pamphlets, the Southern leader knew how to take care of himself. His letters show how he met the missionary labors of "the pious young monks of Harvard and Yale."<sup>43</sup> Despite their endeavors his pet project, the University of Virginia, received the stamp of Gallic thought. Moreover his Alma Mater, William and Mary, still retained its liberal atmosphere, while the neighboring Transylvania University in Kentucky became the headquarters for local Jacobinism, and finally not only in Lexington but in Georgetown and Paris, Kentucky, there were formed societies affiliated with the Jacobin club of Philadelphia.<sup>44</sup> And Ohio itself, although it was the old Connecticut Reserve, was charged with being a State

<sup>42</sup> A View of the New England Illuminati who are Indefatigably Engaged in Destroying the Religion and Government of the United States under a Feigned Regard for Safety and under an Impious Abuse of True Religion, Philadelphia, 1799. Sabin attributes this pamphlet to John Cosins Ogden, author of A View of Religion in New England. Cf. an annotated edition of Joseph Sabin, A Dictionary of Books relating to America, New York, 1868 (copy at New York Public Library). J. B. McMaster, History of the United States, 2,500, quotes the above from the Aurora of September 6, 1800. Query: Was the Aurora article based on the pamphlet entitled A View of the New England Illuminati?

<sup>43</sup> Cf. my American Philosophy, Chapter VI, Virginia and Jefferson, New York, 1907.

<sup>44</sup> E. H. Gillet, History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1,300, 420; 2,144, Philadelphia, 1864.

where infidelity walked "in brazen front."<sup>45</sup> But this western extension of free-thinking societies more properly belongs to the later development in socialistic communities like that of Robert Owen, a development which was fostered by English rather than French influences. Meanwhile the "French craze" had died down, the "Terrible Republic" had been succeeded by a worse tyranny, and Napoleon, especially in his treatment of the free states like Switzerland, had disgusted the mass of Americans.<sup>46</sup>

But a statement made in this connection, that the "rights of men" occupied public thoughts less and the price of cotton more,<sup>47</sup> is hardly borne out by the facts. Politics remained of paramount interest in the American mind. This is shown by the history of the second group of free-thinking societies, which began by discussing metaphysics and ended with influencing legislation. With New York City as a centre and Thomas Paine as a founder, it was Theophilanthropy that had a varied and interesting career. At first the movement was harshly attacked, but the defence grew rapidly strong. The Franco-American free-thinking societies had been marked by extravagances and the silliness of secrecy. The Anglo-American, on the contrary, bore an air of practicability and were open to the public. The author of *Common Sense* was no fool, and his followers carried on his propaganda both by well-edited journals and by frank discussions in what were ingeniously called Halls of Science. In regard to this theophilanthropical movement we may begin with a hostile account. The Deists, says a leader of Princeton, have never been able to

<sup>45</sup> Cf. The Correspondent, New York, 1827, for references to Ohio: 1,308 "Liberal opinions are gaining in the West"; 2,349 "An edition of 5000 copies of Paine's Age of Reason is proposed to meet the demands in Western New York and Ohio."

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Seth Payson's Proofs, p. 248, quoting Mallet de Paris, Destruction of the Helvetic Republic.

<sup>47</sup> William B. Cairns, "Development of American Literature from 1815 to 1830," Bulletin, University of Wisconsin, 1,1-88.

establish and keep up any religious worship among themselves. David Williams of London, priest of nature, abandoned his project because it led to atheism. So did Frederick II, the deistical King of Prussia. Some feeble attempts of the same kind have been made in the United States, but they are unworthy of being particularly noticed. The most interesting experiment of this kind was that made by the Theophilanthropists in France during the period of the Revolution. After some trial had been made of atheism and irreligion, a society was formed upon the pure principles of natural religion. Their creed was simple, consisting of two great articles—the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul. Their moral system also embraced two great principles—the love of God, and the love of man—principles which were indicated by the name “Theophilanthropists.” Their festivals were in honor of the following persons: Socrates, St. Vincent de Paul, J. J. Rousseau, and Washington—a strange conjunction of names truly.<sup>48</sup>

The correction of such an account as this may be found in the words of Thomas Paine, who declares that the precise history of the Theophilanthropists is that they do not call themselves disciples of such and such a man. They avail themselves of the wise precepts that have been transmitted by writers of all countries and in all ages.<sup>49</sup> Now in attempting to form in New York a society for religious inquiry and also a society of Theophilanthropy, Paine’s most sympathetic biographer claimed that the movement was too cosmopolitan to be contained in any local organization.<sup>50</sup> This was in a measure true, but the whole story is to be found in con-

<sup>48</sup> Archibald Alexander, *Evidences of the Christian Religion*, p. 28, Philadelphia, 1836. The above account is based on M. Grégoire, *Histoire de la Theophilanthropie*; see *Quarterly Review* for January, 1823.

<sup>49</sup> M. D. Conway, *Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4, 234, New York, 1894–96.

<sup>50</sup> M. D. Conway, *Life of Thomas Paine*, 2, 426.

nection with one of Paine's picturesque followers, Elihu Palmer, in whose magazine, *The New York Theophilanthropist*, some of the master's posthumous papers saw the light.<sup>51</sup> Palmer was the author of *The Principles of Nature*,<sup>52</sup> a rare volume reprinted by Richard Carlisle, the London publisher who had been imprisoned for the issuance of Thomas Paine's works. It contains a very lively account of the author by his friend, Colonel John Fellows, who with Paine was a charter-member of the first free-thinking society of New York. Palmer, who was born in Connecticut and graduated from Dartmouth, being early reprov'd for the liberality of his sentiments, abandoned Calvinism for Universalism. As his biographer puts it: The childish and impious presumption of supposing the Deity capable of requiring the murder of Jesus Christ, and of calling his son to atone for the trifling *faux pas* of a woman, committed some thousand years before, was too revolting for his honest and manly mind long to brook; and, having obtained the assent of a part of the elders of his congregation to that effect, he advertised in a public paper, the *Aurora*, that on the succeeding Sunday he would deliver a discourse against the divinity of Jesus Christ.<sup>53</sup> This act of imprudence, it is added, drove Palmer even from the society whose main tenet was then hardly tolerated in the country. Turning to law, Palmer was obliged to abandon the undertaking because he had been left blind by an attack of yellow fever. But as the frontispiece of the *Principles* has it: "Though darkness drear obscured his visual ray, his mind unclouded felt no loss of day"—and he enlisted in "reason's cause." As a free-lance lecturer, Palmer now met with some success

<sup>51</sup> M. D. Conway, *Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4, 236, note.

<sup>52</sup> *Or A Development of the Moral Causes of Happiness and Misery Among the Human Species*, 1804; London, 1823.

<sup>53</sup> *Posthumous Pieces*, Elihu Palmer. . . . To Which are prefixed a Memoir of Mr. Palmer by his Friend Mr. John Fellows of New York, p. 6; London, 1826.

in Augusta, Georgia, delivering discourses upon the broad basis of deism. Returning to New York in 1796, it was immediately proposed to him to deliver lectures. Thereupon a small society was formed in aid of his exertions; which assumed, without disguise, the name of The Deistical Society. This appellation was advocated by Mr. Palmer, although some others were in favor of that of The Theophilanthropist, as being less frightful to fanatics, not many of whom would understand the term. Although his lectures were generally pretty numerously attended, there were not many who were disposed to contribute for the support of the principles, and those for the most part were limited in means. It became necessary therefore for him to make occasional excursions to other populous towns to recruit his funds, which he frequently did, to Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Newburgh on the North River.<sup>54</sup>

The *Principles of the Deistical Society of the State of New York* consists of the commonplaces of eighteenth-century deism—that the universe proclaims the existence of one supreme Deity, that the religion of nature is the only universal religion, that science and truth are the great objects for human energy. The animus of the document lies in its final admonition that every member admitted into this association shall deem it his duty, by every suitable method in his power, to promote the cause of nature and moral truth, in opposition to all schemes of superstition and fanaticism claiming divine origin.<sup>55</sup> This admonition explains not only the later programme of the free-thinkers of New York, but the previous statements of Palmer concerning the earlier speculative movements. Such was his excellent defence of Illuminism when he said the Illuminati in Europe have been represented as a vicious combination of persons whose object was the destruction of all the governments

<sup>54</sup> Fellows, Memoir, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 10, 11.

and religions of the world. If the enemies of philosophy, in that part of the globe, mean by governments the corrupt monarchies of the earth, and by religion, popular superstition, founded upon the idea of a supposed mysterious intercourse between beings of the earth and celestial powers, then they are right in this respect; for these are the governments and religions against which reason and philosophy ought to direct their energies; but if by government they mean a system of genuine republicanism, founded upon the equal rights of man, and by religion the idea of simple theism and the immortality of moral virtue, then their assertions are false, and their productions a calumny against reason and the rights of human nature.<sup>56</sup>

Promulgated in the same year as President Monroe's doctrine against entangling political alliances, this was a kindred philosophical doctrine, in which nature was to be considered as free from the encroachment of outside agencies. In a word, this was nothing but logically developed deism, a scheme which implies that the laws governing the world are immutable and that the violations of these laws, or miraculous interference in the movements of nature, must be necessarily excluded from the grand system of universal existence.<sup>57</sup> Here Palmer uses the very language of Paine,<sup>58</sup> while in defending naturalism as against supernaturalism he clearly sees the opposition it will meet. It is this philosophy, he exclaims, that has developed the laws of the physical world and exhibited the principles on which its systematic order depends; it is this philosophy that has unfolded the moral energies of human nature, which has become an object of calumny in the estimation of a cruel and persecuting superstition.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> *Principles of Nature*, p. 114.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Woodbridge Riley, *American Thought From Puritanism to Pragmatism*, p. 55, New York, 1915.

<sup>59</sup> Palmer, *Principles*, p. 113.

Among the advocates of this naturalism Palmer numbers not only the familiar Gallic thinkers from Condorcet to Volney, but Godwin, author of *Political Justice*, and Joel Barlow, the translator of Volney's *Ruins*. Barlow, as a diplomat in foreign parts, had no connection with the Theophilanthropists at home, but he was in thorough sympathy with their principles. Consequently he defended the memory of Thomas Paine, and in his *Advice to the Privileged Orders* presents his view of the established church as "darkening the consciousness of men in order to oppress them." He, nevertheless, takes pains to add that in the United States of America, there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as a church, and yet in no country are the people more religious. All sorts of religious opinions are entertained there, and yet no heresy among them all. All modes of worship are practised, and yet there are no schisms. Men frequently change their creed and their worship, and yet there is no apostasy. They have ministers of religion, but no priests. In short, religion is there a personal and not a corporate concern.<sup>60</sup>

Barlow's contention is borne out by a letter of John Adams to Jefferson in which he speaks of having once addressed an army of fine young fellows from Anabaptists to Atheists, from Moravians to Socinians. This referred to Adams' Philadelphia speech of 1798.<sup>61</sup> Now Palmer in his attacks on the "American priesthood" was both beside the mark and also somewhat inconsistent. Five years before Adams and in Philadelphia itself, he had delivered an oration at Federal Point, which contains strictures upon the union of Church and State abroad, but expressly excepts such a condition of affairs at home. As a sample of Fourth of July oratory upon the subject of illuminism and free thought, Palmer's speech is in-

<sup>60</sup> C. B. Todd, *Life and Letters of Joel Barlow*, pp. 89-90, New York, 1886.

<sup>61</sup> *Works*, ed. C. F. Adams, 10,45, Boston, 1846.

structive. The age of reason and philosophy, he declares, has at length arrived and begins to illuminate the world. While the age of darkness, which spread itself over all nations, was faithfully preserved by the pious alliance of Church and State and humanity wept for the miseries of man, kingcraft and priestcraft, those mighty enemies to liberty and reason, were struck to death by the genius of 1776. Beware, ye American aristocrats! Your principles and efforts are leading you to a precipice. Civil and religious oppression will not gain much ground in the American world. If the cause of France should succeed, then farewell kings, aristocrats, and the long catalogue of clerical impositions. In justice, however, to the American clergy, it ought to be observed that in effecting our Revolution, many of them by their precepts and example afford great service.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless there was a certain justification in the continuance of such attacks as were made by Palmer in radical journals like the *Temple of Reason* and in his own *Prospect or View of the Moral World for the Year 1804*. The latter work had for its frontispiece a symbolic picture of the *Age of Reason* and the *Rights of Man* garnished with a liberty cap. This symbol was psychological. It represented the smouldering resentment of the Columbian Illuminati against certain religious restrictions which had been but recently abolished. Prior to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, as McMaster says, the political rights of man were fenced about with restrictions which would now be thought unbearable. To be enfranchised in South Carolina, the free white man must believe in the existence of a God, in a future state of reward and punishment, and have a

<sup>62</sup> Political Miscellany, passim, New York, 1793. In a note to p. 24, Palmer quotes from Morse, the Geographer, this curious passage: "The clergy in Connecticut have hitherto preserved a kind of aristocratical balance in the very democratical government of the State, which has happily operated as a check upon the overbearing spirit of Republicanism."



freehold of one hundred and fifty acres of land. No atheists, no free thinkers, no Jews, no Roman Catholics, no man, in short, who was not a believer in some form of the Protestant faith, could ever be a governor of New Jersey, New Hampshire, Connecticut, or Vermont. Any rich Christian might be the executive of Massachusetts or Maryland. Elsewhere he must be a Trinitarian and a believer in the inspiration of the Scriptures, or a Protestant and a believer in the divine authority of the Bible, or acknowledge one God, believe in heaven and in hell, and be ready to declare openly that every word in the Testament, both Old and New, was divinely inspired.<sup>63</sup>

While these political restrictions may have been removed, certain social prejudices still hung on. Thus Cooper's novel *Precaution* emphasizes as the chief requirement in the choice of a husband, his piety, and warns the heroine against admiring a deist however handsome he may be.<sup>64</sup> And Harriet Martineau, in her *Society in America* speaks of the opprobrium directed upon such as those who embrace natural religion.<sup>65</sup> To the free thinker, then, the spirit which engendered such narrowness must be crushed. It therefore became the express aim of the New York Society in their organ, *The Theophilanthropist*,<sup>66</sup> to redeem mankind from the degrading fetters of hereditary superstition. The first charge was upon Calvin's *Institutes* "replete with its horrid doctrines and revolting views of the divine mind." How absurd, it is said, that such a system, whose never-ending and excruciating tortures are pronounced the doom of the wicked, should be called a consolatory system! Contrast now the Calvinist and the Theophilanthropist, the rigid sectarian and the lover of God and man, who believes in one supreme

<sup>63</sup> J. B. McMaster, *History of the People of the United States*, 3, 147-148, New York, 1886-1913.

<sup>64</sup> T. R. Lounsbury, J. F. Cooper, pp. 25-26, Boston, 1893.

<sup>65</sup> *Society in America*, 2, 316, New York, 1837.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-5.

and incomprehensible Deity, the Creator and Conservator of the universe; who has for his duties benevolence and justice, and for his religion, the religion of nature, upon whose every leaf his creeds and duties are imprinted.<sup>67</sup>

All this is but an echo of Paine's *Discourse at the Society of the Theophilanthropists*, which declares that the existence of a God is the first dogma of the Theophilanthropist, and the universe his Bible. It is there that he reads of God; it is there that the proofs of His existence are to be sought and to be found.<sup>68</sup> As an organ the New York *Theophilanthropist* was not much of a success.<sup>69</sup> Its readers could not make out what it was all about. Articles defending the character of Thomas Paine were pertinent, but those explaining the morality of Mohammedanism were not. So there was room for a better presentation of free thought. This was fulfilled by *The Correspondent*, edited by the English radical, George Houston, who came over with the halo of persecution, having been imprisoned in Newgate for his translations of d'Holbach's *Ecce Homo*.<sup>70</sup> *The Correspondent* announces itself as "A Strict Enquiry into the Origin of Religion." Its prospectus claims that there is place for a paper which will fearlessly advocate the paramount importance of the laws of nature and the dignity of reason. As one subscriber immediately submits, while every denomination, every sect, and almost every distinct church have their presses, this advantage

<sup>67</sup> The *Theophilanthropist*, containing Critical, Moral, Theological, and Literary Essays . . . by a Society, New York, 1810.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Paine, *Discourse at The Society of the Theophilanthropists*, p. 27, Paris (1797).

<sup>69</sup> Another ephemeral journal was *The Temple of Reason*, published by D. Driscoll, 1800-02, with articles by Paine and Palmer.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. John M. Robertson, *A Short History of Free Thought*, 2, 335, where *The Correspondent* is wrongly given as *The Correspondence*. Robertson also implies that *The Minerva* was an organ of free thought, whereas it announces itself as "A Literary, Entertaining, and Scientific Journal," edited by George Houston, New York, 1824-25.

has hitherto been denied to the deists.<sup>71</sup> This is corroborated by the journal's first press notices. *The National Advocate* says that this is probably the first periodical work ever published in the United States that publicly avows and defends deism. The New York *Times* speaks of the new weekly paper as one in which the Bible is attacked, the Christian system blasphemed, and deism defended—Thomas Paine being the hero and reason the idol. Finally, the Albany *Advocate* proposes to carry on a constant and rigid warfare with *The Correspondent*, and like its esteemed contemporary would consign the liberal organ to the flames. But neither was the latter to be suppressed nor its by-product, the Philosophical Library. As the organ of the Free Press Association the journal starts reporting the Secretary's lectures on "The Inconsistencies, Absurdities, and Contradictions of the Bible," and ends with debates on such a question as "whether a revelation by a supreme being has ever been made to man."<sup>72</sup> Moreover its liberal library began with the publication of the *Ecce Homo* and followed with the theological writings of Paine, Palmer, Hume, Gibbon, and Volney. That both the propaganda and the publications had a wide spread is attested by a letter from a Philadelphia correspondent. Called an infidel and heretic, he read Volney's *Ruins*; having found a copy of Paine, which the owner kept locked up, he bought it. Lending these volumes to his neighbors, they formed a club and soon possessed themselves of the *Ecce Homo*, of Palmer's *Principles*, and of such works as *Christianity Unveiled* and *The Spiritual Mustard Pot*.<sup>73</sup>

*The Correspondent* now becomes a veritable seed-bed for radical clubs. An account of these and their doings form an unwritten but significant chapter in American thought. According to the current numbers of this

<sup>71</sup> The Correspondent, 1,3, 1827-29.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 2,85; 5,13.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 3,219.

journal, there were these activities in the following States: in Delaware, the Wilmington Society investigates the truth or falsehood of the Bible; in Maryland, the Baltimore Association of Liberals stands for a free press, free library, and free discussion; in New Jersey, the Paterson Free Reading Society protests against our libraries containing so few scientific and philosophical works of established character, works consigned to the flames by fanaticism; in Ohio, the Cincinnati Society for Mutual Instruction in Natural Science languished at first, but was later stimulated by the establishment of the *Western Tiller*; in Pennsylvania is found a Philadelphia Society of Liberal Friends, and a Philosophical Society to discuss Paine's *Age of Reason* and Volney's *Ruins*; in Vermont, the Woodstock Free Reading Society annually celebrates Paine's birthday; in New Hampshire, the Dover Free Press Association holds a similar celebration and signals it with a song written for the occasion, which ends as follows:

"What sovereignty is, and from whence its true birth,  
 Oh, PAINE! 'twas *thy* pen that defin'd,  
 And show'd that no right is divine on this earth  
 But the glorious 'Rights of Mankind.'  
 When dark Superstition and Prejudice cease  
 To trammel the mind with their chain,  
 Amid an elysium of joy and of peace,  
 Blest man shall be grateful to PAINE." <sup>74</sup>

Such are the provincial efforts and effusions. The metropolis does more. As successors and heirs to the old Deistical Society, the New York Theophilanthropistical Society widely extends its activities. According to its official organ, between 1827 and 1829, it spreads not only over the city but over the State. Declaring its religion to be the religion of nature, it begins with a Paine celebration, defends the free-thinking of Franklin and Jeffer-

<sup>74</sup> The Correspondent, 3,45.

son, organizes a debating society on the Bowery, and in the upper part of the city inaugurates a society of free inquirers whose object is to paralyze the efforts of bigotry. Under the same auspices and outside of the metropolis, Albany holds a Paine celebration, Lockport starts a journal called *Priestcraft Exposed*, and Rochester one called *Plain Truth*. Naturally all this stirs up a series of attacks. One sample will serve for the rest. As to the Utica auxiliary of the infidel society in New York, says the *Western Recorder*, every decent man and every good citizen will look upon its doings as a public outrage; every man who belongs to it should be distinctly marked as a foe to his country, an enemy both to God and man.<sup>75</sup>

While the Free Press Association never achieved the formation of a proposed General Association of Liberals to spread its principles under one name, it managed to spread those opinions among sympathizers. These were found largely among the first group of socialists formed in the country under the leadership of the English radical philanthropist Robert Owen, the founder of the famous New Harmony community. But before we take up the cause of liberal principles in Ohio and its vicinity, a word is needful as to the winding up of *The Correspondent*. That organ of Theophilanthropy—as it inadvertently acknowledges in its last number—had been too exclusively devoted to theological discussions. But this was not the only reason for its demise. The tone of this journal, it must be confessed, was often cheap. Houston, in the words of an admirer, might have erected “the first Light House for Reason in the East,” as Owen did in the West, but its beams did not penetrate polite society. He offended respectability when, for one thing, he attacked the strict observance of the Sabbath as unconstitutional, and in general was on a par with one of his

<sup>75</sup> *The Correspondent*, 4, 173.

exchanges, *The Herald of Heresy*.<sup>76</sup> But it was from mixing in politics that he met with the most violent objections. To ridicule and agitate against Sabbath stage-coaches was one thing; to deride the laws of blasphemy enacted in New Hampshire was another. While the rural legislators, to punish any "curse or reproach" upon the canonical Scriptures, might seemingly contravene the Federal constitutional rights on freedom of religious belief, still the whole complicated question was one of States' rights. So in 1829, *The Correspondent* went out of business with a last despairing wail regarding the secret propaganda which aimed to injure the printing establishment of George Houston.

Evidently this journal had done its work, for a more exciting political campaign for liberal rights had meanwhile arisen in the East, while in the West another "high priest of atheism and deism" had arisen in the person of Robert Owen. The New Harmony settlement in Ohio, like the Free Enquiry Society in New York, was immediately counted "an odium in polite society." In Pittsburgh, as one of Houston's correspondents recounted, no one would acknowledge to have any dealing with a settlement which contained no church and no Bible society.<sup>77</sup> And Owen himself, to judge from the language he used in writing to the *Western Monthly Review*, did not mince matters in addressing "the deluded pious and the bigot."<sup>78</sup> Moreover in regard to his recent debate at Cincinnati with Alexander Campbell on the general subject "whether mankind can be trained to become more happy with or without religion," Owen took the privative side against the superstitionists. He added that he had been dexterously misrepresented, by a "Kentucky manœuvre."<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> *The Correspondent*, 1,84; 2,78; 3,241.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 3,155.

<sup>78</sup> *Life of Robert Owen by Himself*, 1,152, London, 1857.

<sup>79</sup> *The Correspondent*, 5,285.

Robert Owen came to the country with two main tenets, one negative and one positive. The former was the familiar attack on priestcraft. He explains that he had been early satisfied that all religions had emanated from the same source and their varieties from the same false images of our early ancestors, in short, that all the religions of the world are so many geographical insanities.<sup>80</sup> But the negative must be supplanted by the positive. So in place of an inscrutable supernaturalism Owen put a calculable naturalism. All my qualities, he argued, were forced on me by nature, and my language, religion, and habits by society; nature gave the qualities and society directed them.<sup>81</sup>

We might call all this a violent leap from Puritanism to positivism. In other words, instead of Deity fore-ordaining, heredity and environment were to ordain. At any rate the new determinism must have astonished the natives; but Owen, like the "reasoning machine" which Coleridge called him, was still relentless in his logic. "Had you," he would say, "on my right hand, been brought up under the influence of such circumstances as are to be found at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, you would all have been Indians, save as to the color of your skins. Had you, on my left hand, been exposed from infancy to the circumstances which prevail in China, you would have been Chinese, except in form and figure."<sup>82</sup>

Such were the working plans for Owen's Preliminary Society of New Harmony, where there should be no churches, no creeds, no religious worship, but in their stead moral lectures and such a system of public education as would foster in the young a love of justice, moral-

<sup>80</sup> Frank Podmore, *Robert Owen, A Biography*, 1,9, New York, 1907. Cf. Debate between Robert Owen and the Rev. J. H. Roehnek, p. 7, London, 1837.

<sup>81</sup> Podmore, *ibid.*, 1,20.

<sup>82</sup> J. B. McMaster, *The Acquisition of the Political, Social, and Industrial Rights of Man in America*, p. 91, Cleveland, 1903.

ity, and truth—an education which for the very young included dancing, singing, and military drill, and for the older in years, studies ranging from agriculture and botany to history and music.<sup>83</sup>

The effect of such outright naturalism was seen in the case of Owen's son, who declared: "I have no religion. . . . I have not accustomed myself to personifying a first cause; I embody no superhuman spirits, angelic or infernal."<sup>84</sup> These assertions were made in the Hall of Science, New York, and to a sympathetic circle of free inquirers. When similar sentiments were brought before the general public in the form of a challenge to the clergy of the United States, they elicited an unwarranted stir. In the notorious debate with the Reverend Alexander Campbell, who took up the challenge to meet Owen in a friendly discussion, the socialist brought forth five propositions which he was ready to defend. Assuming that all religions are founded on ignorance, he inferred that they are the only real bar to the formation of a society of virtue, of intelligence, of charity (in the most extended sense).<sup>85</sup> The eight days of debate, which drew as many thousands of hearers, ended as such debates usually do. Mrs. Trollope, who was present, observed that neither the cleric nor the socialist appeared to answer the other, but to confine themselves to the utterances of what they had uppermost in their minds. When the discussion began, the one became too elaborately theological, and the other benighted in the mists of his own theories.<sup>86</sup>

Owen explained that the object of the Cincinnati debate was not to discuss the truths or falsehood of the

<sup>83</sup> Cf. McMaster, *The Acquisition of the Political, Social, and Industrial Rights of Man in America*, p. 93.

<sup>84</sup> R. D. Owen, *An Address on the Influence of the Clerical Profession*, p. 9, London, 1840.

<sup>85</sup> *Debate on the Evidences of Christianity, etc., between Robert Owen and Alexander Campbell*, p. 30, London, 1839.

<sup>86</sup> Mrs. Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 2,207, London, 1832.



Christian religion, but to ascertain the errors in all religions which prevent them from being efficacious in practice, and to bring out all that is really valuable in each, leaving out their errors, and thus to form from them collectively a religion wholly true and consistent, that it may become universal and be acted upon consistently by all.<sup>87</sup> We are not concerned with Owen's projected eclecticism, which harked back to the Jefferson Bible, and in a measure anticipated Comte's *Religion of Humanity*. The ferment of free thought is our concern, but here unfortunately Owen checked an embryonic naturalism by his overheated statements. His kindest biographer acknowledges that he looked upon religion as a kind of insanity;<sup>88</sup> and his *Book of the New Moral World* bears this out. In this world, averred the radical, the priesthood must be abolished and all works of theology destroyed.<sup>89</sup> Referring to Christian believers in a Christian country as "inmates in a lunatic asylum,"<sup>90</sup> Owen did anything but help his valuable social reformers. But his Declaration of Mental Independence capped the climax of his unpopularity among the conservatives. To the mind of the radical, society suffered under a trinity of evils—private property, orthodox religion, and the "marriages of the priesthood of the old immoral world."<sup>91</sup> Owen promulgated these doctrines on what was then the frontier, and at a time when manners were more or less free and easy.<sup>92</sup> But Indiana was not yet Dakota, and the doctrine of divorce for incompatibility of temper had not yet reached the courts. As a local sheet interpreted it, Mr. Owen's "fine theories" allowed persons to dissolve the matrimonial contract at pleasure.<sup>93</sup> And

<sup>87</sup> Podmore, Robert Owen, A Biography, 1,343. <sup>88</sup> Ibid., 2,498.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Owen, Book of the New Moral World, Part III, p. 56.

<sup>90</sup> Debate with Campbell, p. 25.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. pamphlet with this title, Leeds, 1840.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. William Owen, Diary, 1824–25, Indianapolis, 1900.

<sup>93</sup> Knoxville, Tenn., Enquirer, May 16, 1827.

worse was to follow when the reformer's son and namesake subsequently issued his *Moral Physiology, or A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question*. The treatise was not brief but plain, very plain, and one can imagine the air of astonished horror with which directions on birth control were received among the genteel classes, especially in the East where the traditions of prisms and prunes still obtained. A journal like *The March of Mind* might declare that Robert Owen's simple declaration of mental independence unshackled the minds of hundreds from the thralldom of superstition; but when his two sons and the "female republican," Frances Wright, removed to New York, they got into hot water. Miss Wright, said Robert Dale Owen, had radical views touching the independence of women, whether married or single.<sup>94</sup> To this must be added her views on abolition as shown in her attempts to overcome the prejudices against negroes in her community at Nashoba, Tennessee. Finally, there were her pronounced opinions in favor of the dignity of labor, which came out when she and the two younger Owens formed the left wing of the Free Enquirers of New York. The older group of Enquirers, as *The Correspondent* put it, had taken a set against clerical impostors—"the Eastern Magi, with their black cockade." These efforts were largely literary, but now with the advent of the Western reformers, theory was succeeded by practice and the free-thinkers entered the political arena.

The year of the last number of *The Correspondent* was the year of the first year of *The Workingman's Advocate*, which declared in its prospectus that there was something "radically wrong" in the "existing state of society."<sup>95</sup> In these social reforms we take interest only in so

<sup>94</sup> Threading My Way, p. 302, London, 1874.

<sup>95</sup> No. 1, October, 1829, quoted by J. B. McMaster, *The Acquisition of the Political, Social, and Industrial Rights of Man in America*, p. 101.

far as they were connected with mental independence. Thus the *Advocate* protested against such exclusive privileges as one part of the community having the means of education in college, while another was restricted to the common schools. Along with the *Advocate* there now sprang up a new crop of liberal journals; such were the New York *Telescope*, which scrutinized the encroachments of the clergy; the Rochester *Spirit of the Age*, which advocated an open Sunday; the Charleston *Free Press*, which announced "no sect, no creed, open to all." These journals were in general free-thinking, but their particular aim was political. We may only note that, because of this connection, the Workingmen's party had hard sledding in New York. Theirs was called the Fanny Wright ticket, the infidel ticket.

But the fight became even more complicated when the movement for social reform became involved with that peculiar movement, the Anti-Masonic agitation. This we are concerned with only as it serves to summarize the whole business of our early free-thinking societies. New York State politics from 1826-30 was stirred up by what was called the "Western excitement." This referred to the real abduction and alleged murder of one William Morgan at Fort Niagara. According to the report submitted to the State Senate, Morgan was an obscure representative among the thirty thousand Masons of the commonwealth. Attempting to publish a book exposing the secrets of his order, he was spirited away by the "new order of Jesuits"—the society of Free and Accepted Masons.<sup>96</sup> According to the report of the Anti-Masonic convention, the committee of inquiry appointed by that body found, among other things, that the expositions of Masonic secrets were true, that Freemasonry originated early in the eighteenth century, and

<sup>96</sup> James C. Odierno, *Opinions on Speculative Masonry, Relative to its Origin, Nature and Tendency*, pp. 190-198, Boston, 1830.

that its principles were inconsistent with the genius of American institutions.<sup>97</sup> This report, although ridiculed by the Masonic organization itself, was substantiated by what one of the oppositors called "a host of new, learned, and scrutinizing enemies."<sup>98</sup> Their testimony was given in a set of *Opinions on Speculative Masonry, Relative to its Origin, Nature, and Tendency*. These opinions, offered by the colleges, the bench, and the cloth, disclosed that history was repeating itself; that that which had happened in France was happening here. In a word, this meant that the old Masonry had been penetrated by Illuminism; that the original English convivial society of Free and Accepted Masons had been perverted by the intrusion of fanciful Gallic novelties. As to its origin, the critics concluded that the ancient order was not ancient. As Professor Leonard Woods remarked respecting the alleged high antiquity of Freemasonry, "If they assert that it existed in Solomon's day, they might as well assert that Solomon made a balloon and frequently rode in it from Jerusalem to Tyre."<sup>99</sup> The venerable age of the institution is further rendered ridiculous by the fact that the Grand Lodge of England was instituted in 1717, and the first American lodge in 1733.<sup>100</sup>

So much for the origin of the movement. As for its nature, similar unfavorable opinions were held. Though Washington joined the early Anglo-American branch, he came to suspect the Gallic varieties of the order. Remembering the machinations of Genêt and the activities of the candidates of the Jacobin societies in the land, the President's Farewell Address contained a grave warning against secret societies.<sup>101</sup> To its opponents then Free-

<sup>97</sup> Augustus Row, *Masonic Biography and Dictionary*, pp. 278-279, Philadelphia, 1868.

<sup>98</sup> Odierne, p. 250.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>100</sup> L. F. Fosdick, *The French Blood in America*, pp. 388-391, New York, 1911.

<sup>101</sup> Odierne, p. 52.

masonry is fictitious in its origin and dubious in its nature. It is also pernicious in its tendency. Here the bill of attainder has many counts. It is anti-Christian because it appeals to Jew and pagan; it is blasphemous because it attempts a personification of the Great Jehovah; it is illegal because it swears to protect a companion "whether right or wrong"; it is seditious because the candidate for the third degree swears to keep the brothers' secrets . . . "murder and treason only excepted, and those at my own discretion."<sup>102</sup>

Such were the charges brought by a host of seceders from the order. The old religious denunciations of the secret societies were now reinforced by political denunciations, and serve to explain the bitterness of the attacks on the part of the legal talent of the country. Thus the evil influence of Masonry, civil, social, and political, was portrayed by Charles Sumner in an address to the Suffolk Committee, while John Quincy Adams devoted a whole volume of letters tracing the institution of Masonry from its introduction into the Protestant colonies of North America to the admissions of the Rhode Island Legislative Committee.<sup>103</sup>

But we will not meddle with politics except to note that because Masonry sought to influence "the bench of justice" it met with added opposition from "the sacred desk." The cloth now used an old weapon to meet the new menace. This is their syllogism: Free Masonry is connected with Illuminism; but Illuminism is infidel; therefore, "Masonry leads directly to infidelity." Such is the reasoning implied in Thacher's letters to a brother in the church. Now how can it be proved that Masonry and Illuminism are mutually coupled together? Thacher avails himself of the threadbare arguments of Robinson's *Proofs*. He also has some new evidence. A Massachu-

<sup>102</sup> Odierno, *passim*.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. *Letters on the Masonic Institution*, Boston, 1847.

setts friend informs him that he had heard indirectly through Dr. Timothy Dwight that the lodge of Portsmouth was "Illuminated"; and directly from a member of that lodge that it was affiliated with French Jacobinism. The writer also knew a young man who had become a gross infidel from joining a French society in one of the Middle States, this society teaching that "the Christian religion was all an imposition, and would soon be abolished."<sup>104</sup>

From such information, Thacher is satisfied of the validity of the original proposition, that the tendency of Freemasonry is to infidelity, since it was exactly fitted for an engine of infidel philosophy, particularly as new-modelled and ornamented by the French. Finally, says the author, we cannot suppose that so large and fair a portion of the earth as America should be entirely free from the machinations of the Grand Orient of Paris. "There are certainly very many leading Masons of high standing in this country who are deists; and I have personally known several who were not ashamed to avow their atheism."<sup>105</sup>

All this was written in 1829, the year in which the *New York Correspondent* ceased and the *New Harmony Gazette*, changed to the *Free Enquirer*, was turned into a political organ. We may therefore take the third decade of the century as marking the beginning of the end of free-thinking societies in America. Originally attacked because of their so-called atheistic tendencies, their secrecy was their final undoing. Their possible value as vehicles of rationalism had disappeared in foolish mummery. So from this time on, those who had liberal leanings joined organizations like Brook Farm and followed masters like the sweetly reasonable Emerson. Moreover, for those who preferred the Gallic type of

<sup>104</sup> Letter of June 29, 1829, by Ethan Smith, *Dissertation on the Prophecies*, second edition, p. 176.

<sup>105</sup> Odierne, p. 50.

rationalism, the philosophy of Victor Cousin offered a welcome addition to their intellectual diet.<sup>106</sup> But it should be noticed that those who took up the New England Transcendentalism and the French Eclecticism were largely college-bred; for the masses, with a mere common-school education, there was no outlet for superabundant mental activity. Some took up with revivalism, as an emotional substitute for thought; but the radicals were left in the lurch. There were no more "Tom" Paines left and no "Bob" Ingersolls had as yet appeared on the horizon. Moreover, a civil war was to come and go before Herbert Spencer's agnosticism spread through the land. It was for such reasons then that Robert Owen's "Incomprehensible Power" gained no worshippers and that his "Rational Religion" fell flat. So, as Owen's son summarized the matter in the Forties, "While the Presidents of the United States were admittedly heterodox at the founding of the republic,<sup>107</sup> now politicians are circumspect, and the orthodox clergy, lamenting the dangers of infidelity, are afraid to discuss both sides of the question; . . . they choose that heresy shall be put down without an argument, and are responsible for their insane revivals. Self-styled servants of God, they extend their society from the shores of the Atlantic to the Indian wigwams on the Missouri."

<sup>106</sup> See my article "La philosophie française en Amérique" in the *Revue Philosophique*, November, 1917.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. R. D. Owen, *Address on Free Enquiry* [and] *Aphorisms* by Thomas Jefferson, pp. 10-12, London, [n. d.].